

Reflection report

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This one month exchange with Harvard Medical School at the Plastic Surgery service of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center has been an unforgettable experience. I gained lots of new and different perspectives not only in the medical field, but also in everyday life and interpersonal interactions. I am fluent in English, so basic communications weren't an issue for me. However, the speed in which they speak medical jargon, the medical abbreviations and even just the pronunciation of the medical terms took me a while to get used to, and even longer for me to remotely be on par with the residents. There were also a lot of cultural differences that I noticed. Even something as small as greeting each other every day regardless of whether you know them personally or not is a scene that I don't see often in Taiwan at all. I also really enjoyed the atmosphere in the teams there

The medical system and settings in USA is considerably different than the ones in Taiwan. I really like how the attendings in the US spend a lot of time explaining to each patient how everything works, what are the reasons for doing what they did and making sure that the patients fully understand. This situation is less likely seen in a medical centre in Taiwan due to the large amount of patients each day. However, for the patients to receive this level of service from doctors in the US, lots of money must be invested in their insurance policies. The medical insurance plays a significant part in determining what type of medical help patients will receive. Another aspect that I've noticed was that patients in Boston were more educated and expects more from doctors as well.

One of the most important aspects of this exchange for me was meeting the people in Boston. My supervisors at my service were all very welcoming and had no qualms with answering all sorts of questions of mine. Residents were whom I spent the most time with, as there were no other medical students on the service at the same time. I would've liked to meet another medical student but that was not the case for me. This is not a compulsory rotation for medical students, so for two students to be on the same rotation at the same period of time is entirely based on luck.

At BIDMC, my curriculum comprised of morning rounds, meetings, the OR, clinics, and consults. I wasn't given a set schedule, nor was I required to be at a certain place at a certain time, besides morning rounds and meetings. This flexibility allowed me to decide which procedure to see, or which clinic to attend, which catered to my interests and expanded my knowledge. Other than learning about plastic surgery, parts of the Hand Surgery service overlaps with the plastic service at BIDMC, so I had the chance of seeing procedures on the hand surgery team as well. I also spent a day a week at a hand clinic, either in BIDMC or in a private clinic. I really enjoyed learning about hand surgery, and saw how precise and delicate a hand surgeon could operate. I could always scrub in on cases in the OR if I wished to. I was also given the chance of doing some suturing on small wounds, but more often than not, I assisted in other basic jobs and mainly observed. As for ward services, because we are of a surgical specialty, there wasn't a lot of emphasis on this area. I helped out with writing basic progress notes and changing the dressings. Consults were a lot more rewarding for me, as I had a chance of sewing up a patient's laceration wounds on his hands. It took me a while to finish, but a hand surgeon fellow complimented me on the job.

This is a service that does not ask students to have responsibilities. This sometimes makes me question whether I really am learning anything or not. The curriculum was so free and what a student could get out of this rotation is entirely based on the student, so I felt a bit lost. This could be because I've grown used to the studying and the teaching methods in Taiwan. I observed a lot of procedures that aren't usually performed at my hospital but are considered as basic OR procedures in the US, did some basic suturing, wrote progress notes, took patient histories, performed basic hand PE, and helped out whenever I could. I also helped write consult notes which focuses more on history taking and assessments. Some would argue that I indeed have gained a lot which I definitely agree in some aspects. In others, I feel like I am just there to stand in as an extra pair of hands. Furthermore, at my level of education at the moment, and the fact that I am not set on plastic surgery, I feel that the plastic service is too specialized. The discussions between residents and attendings were usually on how to perform the procedure, where to draw the markings, what are the aesthetic effects, etc, which in my opinion, is more beneficial at a later stage in my life. Nevertheless, I definitely benefitted from doing my rotation for a month at BIDMC. I became more independent, learned how to work in a completely different environment, and made some important connections. I also could see what it is like to practice in the US first-handedly, thus giving me different views on the same profession.

